

# Austin Times

Aug/Sept  
2006  
Volume 5  
Issue 4

A NEWSLETTER FOR ENTHUSIASTS OF AUSTIN PRE-1955

## IN THIS ISSUE

We look at the WWI Austin aeroplane and the inseparable life of air ace Albert Ball VC DSO MC.

And Aida Maurice goes back to Australia with a theory about that Eighteen, then on to the south of France to help a distressed Ten.

While the editor investigates that remarkable Austin powered invention, the Hydro Glider.

## COMING SOON

As promised, Bent will be wiping the varnish off his hands, having taken a brief look at some of Austin's estate cars

**DON'T MISS IT, IT'S ALL IN YOUR FAVOURITE AUSTIN NEWSLETTER. AND REMEMBER, IF YOU HAVE AN AUSTIN STORY TO TELL, THIS IS THE PLACE FOR ANYTHING PRE-'55 ON YOUR PREFERRED MAKE.**

# Austin's ace

by  
**BENT  
HORSINGTON**



*Austin output of aircraft in WWI was prolific. These are SE5a's, one of the most highly acclaimed fighters of all.*

It's not surprising that someone with Herbert Austin's inventive mind was taking an active interest in flying machines long before the experiments of the Wright brothers and the momentous events at Kitty Hawk in December 1903.

Austin was attracted to the aeroplane by the trials of Sir Hiram Maxim. Around 1894 American-born Maxim had invented 'something which would enable these Europeans to cut each others throats with greater facility' - the machine-gun.

But by the 1890s he had turned his attention to more altruistic pursuits and built a steam powered aeroplane. The 7000 pound monster with its twin naphtha fired engines and 17 foot propellers did actually 'fly' on July 31, 1895, at Bawdley's Park in Bexley to the south of London, and it was the preparatory experiments which must have ignited Austin's imagination.

So much so that on June 4, 1894, he wrote to Maxim and sent him drawings of an aeroplane. These

were well received although the idea of gas - which would probably have been hydrogen - between the skins of the fuselage of a machine carrying a naphtha burner; was politely dismissed; probably very wisely.

Maxim was one and the same as the partner in Vickers, Sons and Maxim who funded the automotive activities during Austin's time at Wolseley and many of the flying machine parts were made under Herbert Austin's supervision.

Although Maxim continued to work on designing a successful steam flying machine Austin appears to have taken little or no part. However, in 1909 he became involved with another pioneer of powered flight, the unlikely Reverend Swann of Liverpool.

Swann's machine was built at

**'Something which would enable these Europeans to cut each others throats with greater facility'.**

*Sir Hiram Maxim*

Longbridge, as a special project it would seem, and used a Belgian FN petrol engine. It never flew but could, apparently, 'hop'.

Suitably chastened, Austin kept away from aeroplanes until forced back into the field by the demands of the First World War.

Production for the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service was under the control of the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough who awarded Austin a contract in 1915 to build 52 of the new RE (Reconnaissance Experimental) 7 aeroplanes.

This was actually used as a bomber and Longbridge's contribution was just over a fifth of the total.

The aircraft was powered by a 150 horse-power, air cooled, V12 of Royal Aircraft Factory design. It was capable of about 85 mph, carried to a ceiling of 6500 feet on its 57 foot wingspan.

The bomb load, supplemented by a single machine gun, was around 336 pounds and the somewhat haphazard methodology would have been for the co-pilot/observer to aim by 'eye' and manually drop the explosive over the side.

The job of construction must have gone well as Longbridge got a repeat order, this time for no fewer than 300 of the up-rated RE8s.

A smaller, lighter aeroplane than the RE7 (47ft wing-tip to wing-tip) it was faster at 130 mph, could fly twice as high and was better armed with two, sometimes three, machine guns but 70 pounds less of bombs.

Over 4000 entered service between its introduction in autumn 1916 and the end of the War, to make it the most widely used British

**Historian, Bob Wyatt, puts 'SE5 technique' beautifully when he quotes, the advice to new pilots as: 'Dive and zoom, old boy'!**

*The Austin 1905-1952*

two-seater biplane on the Western Front.

They were employed not only for reconnaissance and bombing but as a ground attack aircraft and with allusions to rhyming slang became affectionately known as 'Harry Tates'.

However, the type was slow and cumbersome and losses were heavy. The most notorious came on the morning of April 13, 1917, when 59 Squadron's entire allocation of six were shot down in a couple of minutes over Douai in northern France.

Among the aggressors was 'The Red Baron', Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen, notching up his 41st of 80 'kills'.

Appropriately for the Austin family - Herbert and Helen Austin had met and married in that country and their first child was born there - three Australian Units, One, Three and Seven, were equipped with RE8s.

But by far the most famous aeroplane and the most numerous made by Longbridge, was the SE5a of which 1550 were 'Austins'.

The type - SE stands for Scouting Experimental - is usually acclaimed as being the finest fighter aircraft of any nationality of the Great War and was never surpassed during that conflict.

It was designed for Farnborough by H P Holland, J Kenworthy, who later went to work for Austin, and Major F W Goodden, who was killed in a prototype when an early design of wing collapsed in flight.

The finished product was fast, quiet, high-flying and manoeuvrable. But above all it provided a stable platform for the Lewis gun above the upper wing, and the Vickers type on the port side of the fuselage.

Bob Wyatt, in his masterly book *The Austin 1905-1952* (David and Charles 1981) puts 'SE5 technique' beautifully when he quotes the advice to new pilots as: 'dive and zoom, old boy'!

*RE8 was the most widely used aircraft on the Western Front. They were faster and better armed than the RE7 and 300 of the 4000 that served were built at 'The Austin'.*





*For a time, Albert Ball was the leading British ace. He loved Nieuports, loathed SE5s and designed his own machine for Austin to build.*

At the heart of the SE5s and the source of many of its attributes was a superb water-cooled, 150 hp, V8 Hispano-Suiza engine and the first machines so powered went to France in the Spring of 1917.

As early as June a similar motor of 200 hp replaced the original unit and the designation was changed to SE5a.

With the engines came licences for the British and French (for the celebrated SPAD) to construct them and it has to be said, great difficulty was experienced. Eventually the Spanish-Franco make was dropped in favour of the equally vexed Wolseley Viper.

Early glory came on September 23, 1917, when Lieutenant Arthur Rhys Davids, patrolling with a flight of seven SE5s, brought down Werner Voss, who was Richtofen's number two. Although a 'sole kill' it did much to win the aircraft approbation among pilots and capture the imagination of the public.

Someone who was transferred from Nieuport 17s - another highly acclaimed French machine - was Captain Albert Ball, son of an Austin director.

Nottingham-born, Ball was, for a time, Britain's leading ace. He had joined the Sherwood Foresters regiment from university where he had been studying engineering, but transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in 1915.

By the summer of 1916 he had chalked up 11 'kils' and in a further three months over the Somme gunned his total to 30.

## FRENCH SCHOOLCHILDREN WHO REMEMBER ALBERT BALL

**T**he cornfield where Albert Ball's SE5 fell was at Annoeullin, between Lille and Lens, some way north of the Somme battlefields.

Legend has it that a young girl, Cécille Deloffre, ran to the wreckage to find Ball still alive. But she could speak no English, as you would expect, and he, no French, which in the light of his background, is surprising.

However, confusion reigned and the assistance the stricken airman needed could not be provided.

Subsequently, the pilot's father, another Albert, bought the field.

In 1999 a new school was to be built at Annoeullin and it was the children who were asked to choose the name from a list of local celebrities.

They chose that of Albert Ball VC DSO MC.

A promotional poster for a classic car show. The top half features the text 'What's your classic?' in a large, stylized font. Below this, a line of various classic cars is shown on a checkered surface. The text '...the answer is at the UK'S biggest classic car show!' and 'A CLASSIC MIX OF OVER 1000 CARS' is positioned to the right of the cars. The bottom section of the poster has a black background with white text: 'Classic motor 2006 show', '27-28-29 October', and 'The NEC Birmingham'. At the very bottom, it says '...tickets on sale now!' followed by the website 'www.necclassicmotorshow.com' and the phone number '0870 060 3776'.

*Production of SE5s and Sopwith Camels (right) made the future of AFB1 - a 'fine fighter' - uncertain.*

We can only guess what prompted Ball to declare: 'The SE5 has turned out a dud. It is a great shame for everyone expects such a lot from them. But it is a rotten machine.'

But we know that in 1916, before the prototype of the SE5 flew in that December, he had designed a fighter to take on, in particular, the Fokkers. The Air Board, who had to approve such ventures, turned Ball's concept down but he used his influence with the Director of Air Organization to get the go-ahead for two trial machines on whose success would hinge a larger order.

Longbridge was co-opted to build the Austin-Ball AFB1 and there seems little doubt it was a sound machine.

It had a span on the upper wing of 50 feet and on the lower of 30. A Lewis gun was fitted on top of the former and power came from a 200 hp Hispano-Suiza engine.

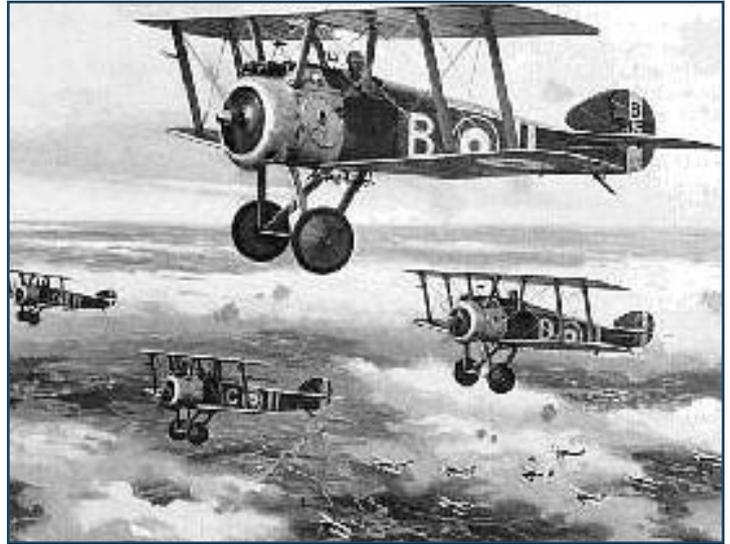
A second machine gun fired through a hollow propeller shaft and had its breech below the instrument panel. This was one of the first times this arrangement had been used and Austin patented the details.

Work was proceeding on the AFB1 when, on the evening of May 7, 1917, Ball flew his SE5, on which he had lowered the seat and removed the Triplex windscreen and Lewis gun to improve performance, into the same thundercloud as Lothar von Richtofen.

Both Richtofen, Manfred's younger brother, and Ball fell to earth. Although the German was credited with downing this popular British ace, Ball's SE5 was seen from the ground emerging from the cloud, apparently undamaged, but upside down and with a 'dead' engine.

Richtofen survived and Ball was reported missing.

The AFB1 flew two months later. An official report, written that July reads: *'It incorporates many of the ideas of an experienced fighter pilot and owes its inspiration to his persistent and determined efforts. This is a first rate airplane, is pleasant to fly and as fast as the SE5 with a better climb rate. Despite its performance, the steady production of SE5s and Sopwith Camels currently, could make for an uncertain future for this fine fighter.'*



In fact, the future was not so much uncertain as non-existent.

And as it was realized Albert Ball VC DSO MC must be dead, so too died the AFB1

Like Vernon Austin, killed two years before, Albert was 21.

Just as it may have given the Austins some sense of comfort when the Works went into large scale ammunition production shortly after Vernon's death, a persistence with military aircraft may have been seen as honouring the memory of Albert Ball.

The AFT3, also called the Osprey, was a triplane. Designed in 1917, it was probably intended as a rival for Sopwith's Triplane that had been used by the Royal Naval Air Service since 1916.

The Austin, registered X15, was wood built and had the novel feature of all six wing sections being interchangeable. Powered by a radial engine, it was being tested and demonstrated through much of 1918.

The Greyhound was a challenger to the Bristol Fighter which had

**Ball's SE5 was seen from the ground emerging from the cloud, apparently undamaged, but upside down and with a 'dead' engine**

begun its career on an inauspicious note in April 1917.

'Bloody April' was the consequence of inexperienced pilots being advised not to attempt sudden manoeuvres, as there was a mistaken belief the Bristol was structurally weak.

Consequently, when six met 'The Red Baron' over Douai four were despatched.

The Austin would have been a sophisticated alternative. Amazingly, it carried wireless, heating and oxygen equipment, not to mention an in-built camera. But there was an Achilles heel in the ABC Dragonfly rotary engine's 300 troublesome horses.

Aircraft production procedures at Longbridge involved testing and flying the machines from the company airfield at Cofton Hill. In the workshops 130 carpenters and some 200 riggers and fitters toiled, and in one spectacular week of SE5a production in 1918, 60 examples were completed.

In addition, aero engines of many different sizes, types and makes were produced and when the war eventually ended there was an attempt to capitalize in a particularly innovative way on these new found skills.

It would be incorrect to describe the Austin Whippet as the aircraft for the masses, but Kenworthy of SE5 fame came up with this design for a small, simple, low maintenance aeroplane with popular appeal.

It was constructed on a tubular steel frame, was barely 16 feet long, and had folding wings. It could land in 150 yards and was to cost about £450. Power came from an Anzani six cylinder rotary and the pilot, having taken 10 minutes to

learn to fly it, could cover around 180 miles on a tankful of fuel with the potential for a top speed of 95 mph.

But like so much else that Austin developed on the aircraft front, the Whippet came to nothing.

One last unsuccessful attempt at getting an aeroplane off the ground was made with the Kestrel.

Kenworthy penned it as a Beardmore powered two-seater capable of 100 mph with a cruising speed and ceiling of 80 mph and 3000 feet respectively. Fuel consumption of 32 mpg would have given about four hours 30 minutes in the air.

The wings of Whippets that were never completed went to make a pergola in son-in-law Arthur Waite's garden... or so the story goes.

### FLEA IN ITS EAR

As a further aside it's worth noting that Austin had yet another, almost as unsuccessful attempt, at getting into the air in the 1930s.

This centred on the Austin Seven when that engine was used to power a d.i.y. aeroplane called the Flying Flea.

In the same way that it was vogue to build sailing dinghies in your back garden, and in some instances back bedroom, the 'Flea' followed the same philosophy. But there's rather less latitude in the design of an aeroplane than a sailboat, and if the Flying Flea failed to be a 'killer' in the marketplace it succeeded once too often when hedge-hopping and was grounded.

Readers who belong to an Austin Seven club will find some information on this device in issue 2006B of the Austin Seven Clubs' Association magazine.



*The Whippet wasn't exactly the 'Austin Seven of the air', but it was a small, simple, low maintenance aeroplane with popular appeal. It failed to take-off and surplus wings were used to build a pergola!*

# Pick of the picnic...

Good friend in Australia and occasional contributor to *Austin Times*, **BILL BALLARD**, has been to the annual picnic at Marong.

For those of you who do not remember the details from Bill's previous visits, it's 14 kilometres west of Bendigo in Central Victoria and he reminds us that it's the ideal location for attracting cars from all over Victoria and that means - *Austins*.

Bill also points out that weather for the event is notoriously inclement but this year the gods smiled and three times the usual number of cars turned out.



*As you know your editor will never pass up an opportunity to include a BS1 Sixteen (or Twelve Bill doesn't know!). Nice car but pity about the colour which certainly wasn't a UK original though it's close to Austin's pre-War 'bluebird blue'.*



*I think on the last two occasions we featured a WE they were horseboxes, so how splendid to bring you a fire appliance on this chassis.*



*Nice earlyish A30 dwarfed by an American your editor can't identify. I say 'earlyish' because regular readers will know the first cars were quite different. A bit of non-originality around the wheels, I'd say?*

*And here's a trio of models we don't hear nearly enough about in 'Times'. What better than the well-used-looking Somerset on the left, the smart early Devon with a factory-fitted opening roof in the centre - just the job for all that sunshine they had this year - and a A105 version of the Westminster dating from about 1956 and just outside our period.*



# Shades of Bluebird for Longbridge



**T**here's no question that the reputation of the Austin company for fine, innovative engineering attracted organizations and individuals to its products.

We saw that earlier in the case of the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough, but it was also so with pioneering individuals, one such being the incredible Walter (Wally) Davies.

Davies was born at Springmere in Dudley, Worcestershire in 1891.

While still attending the town's Holly Hall School he revealed himself to be a revolutionary thinker with remarkable determination.

These traits are rather amusingly illustrated in those schooldays when he decided he would like to visit a battleship, theoretically more feasible than it sounds, as his home lay in the heartland of the Great Western Railway, a company wont to run excursions here, there and everywhere, including Weymouth.

Davies used his skills, firstly as a draughtsman, to sketch the new battleship *HMS King Edward VII*, then as an entrepreneur to draft a letter to the Admiralty.

Quite simply it requested permission to visit such a vessel, when he visited Weymouth on a GWR Whit Tuesday excursion.

Rather gamely, Rear Admiral A L Winsloe responded on behalf of their Lordships wishing to know how many would be in the young Davies's party.

The rear admiral also

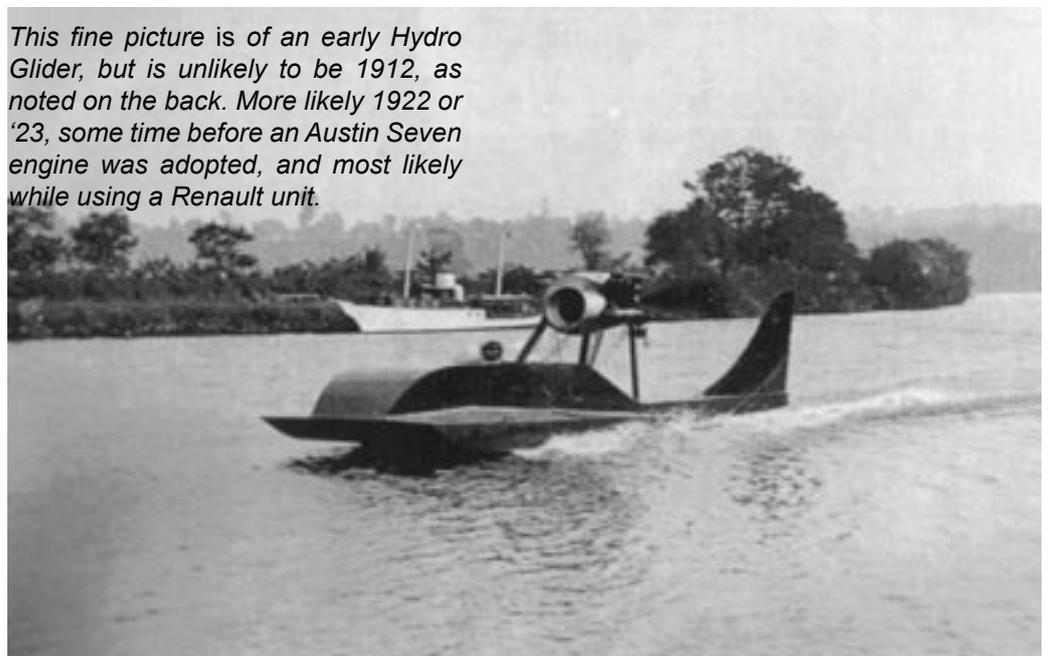
*Walter Davies was nothing if not imaginative! This is him, a more modest pioneer aviator, pretending to be Bleriot*

meet him and three friends at the station and a boat to take them, first to Winsloe's flagship, *HMS Sapphire*.to meet the officers, have a tour and take lunch. They then proceeded to *Triumph* for a further inspection and another meal.

To some extent, Davies's interests were paralleling those of Herbert Austin a few years earlier, because on May 27, 1911, Dudley folk saw him at the controls of an aeroplane he had designed and built himself.

It had been taken to the Cavalry (or maybe *Calvary*) Field at The Priory and flew for an unrecorded distance, some 12 feet above the ground. A remarkable achievement; somewhat better than the Reverend Swann's 'hops'

*This fine picture is of an early Hydro Glider, but is unlikely to be 1912, as noted on the back. More likely 1922 or '23, some time before an Austin Seven engine was adopted, and most likely while using a Renault unit.*



Almost immediately, though, Davies became interested in gliders and with the backing and co-operation of a Mr Bray, who ran the Electric Picture Palace in Halesowen, close to Birmingham, he built a machine with a 35 foot wing-span.

This flew in the West Midlands town in September, 1913, but Davies soon reverted to powered flight.

He formed a relationship with the Sam Summerfield Flying School at Bisley Common, Birmingham, and noted as one of his achievements teaching a group of Chinese to fly.

Soon after he moved to the design office of the Bournemouth Aviation Company and designed a 80 horsepower two-seater bi-plane that could reach 7500 feet using its Anzani engine.

But when peace returned Davies turned his attention to the water rather than the air. It was to be there that his most inventive work was to take place, and along the way his relationship with Austin spawned.

Still in cahoots with Mr Bray, Davies had become an advocate of the hydroplane. Little is now known about his first craft other than it was called *Oak Leaf*. However, we can assume, it had a fairly conventional propeller system as the inventor is soon making the point that he wants to 'have a flutter with an air driven boat'.

*Oak Leaf II* was to have a six cylinder aeroplane engine, of unknown make, mounted on a triangular frame in a hull Davies built himself.

It was towed down river to Stourport on October 30, 1921, causing much consternation, one imaginative observer concluding that it was 'a fire escape'.

Davies's concept was a narrow beam to combat water resistance and cut through turbulence. In fact the hull was so slim, it needed quite weighty outboard stabilizers.

For the maiden trip Mr Bray served as engineer, Bernard Bray, who was 12 and, we must conclude, his son, acted as observer and Davies himself managed the controls.

The craft bottomed at Blackstone, encountered swans just beyond Bewdley that 'nearly fouled the propeller' (scant regard for the wildlife, obviously!) then, having turned at Victoria Bridge, Ardley, was holed on a small natural weir on the way back.

Failure of the engine's water pump and the vessel taking water caused the adventure to be concluded under tow.



As handsome as they come, this 1937 craft is for the Maharajah of Bhopal.

Nonetheless, the trial was considered a great success. Speeds of between 16 and 18 mph had been achieved and Davis was to say: '*Oak Leaf II* went where no boat, unless air propelled, could have gone and had this boat been covered with duralumin instead of zinc, the rock would not have penetrated'.

As with Austin's aeroplane prototypes the engine was probably a weakness. Davis commented on how difficult the six cylinder had been to fit and after that first voyage announced his intention to use a higher-powered Renault.

Whether this was an improvement is not known but Davies was to turn to the Austin Seven unit for later hydro gliders and this clearly worked as the Austin publicity department were prompted to make a film highlighting the application.

We cannot be sure which of the numerous models used the Austin but most likely it was those constructed in the mid to late 30s.

There is no question the design had enormous potential, but as is so often the case, lack of capital and lack of imagination by the authorities stifled the widespread adoption of the craft for every purpose where economical, high speed

**'*Oak Leaf II* went where no boat, unless air propelled could have gone and had this boat been covered with duralumin instead of zinc, the rock would not have penetrated'.**

navigation in shallow waters was required.

The joy of his first encounter with the Admiralty was not repeated and the admirals were described as 'thick headed' when they poured scorn on his invention and refused to take it up.

It gave pleasure, though, to eccentrics the world, over customers including a millionaire in Santiago and the Maharajah of Bhopal.

By a strange reversal Davies's greatest acclaim in later years came in WWII when he designed a ground training 'aircraft'.

Helped by cadets from Halesowen 223 ATC a prototype of the machine, that enabled trainee pilots to learn the rudiments of flying from the safety of the airfield, was constructed during 1941.

Although the RAF showed interest, and did indeed send an Air Commodore to try it out, other air forces greeted it eagerly and numerous examples were built by the Australians who adorned their very first with the Halesowen coat of arms.

Davies never quite gave up on hydro gliders and in 1950 took a world record for this type of craft. *D22 Lapwing* crossed the white water at Folly Point, near Bewdley, on his native Severn at 51 mph with Wally Davies himself at the controls.

And it is extremely ironic, as Davies was always swift to point out, that when Donald Campbell's *Bluebird* took the world water speed record in 1955, her design was very similar to his own - a concept scorned by so many in authority for so long.

### DON'T FORGET...

To a large extent, *Austin Times* can only ever be as good as you make it.

If you would like to see an aspect of pre-1955 Longbridge history covered the editor would love to hear from you. It may take a while to get into print, because research takes time and the more obscure aspects an enormous amount of time...and digging!

On the other hand you can always write it yourself - there's plenty of room in *Austin Times* for anything Austin that's legal and decent.

### REACH US AT...

Martyn.Nutland@wanadoo.fr or write to Martyn at 10 Av de la Porte de Ménilmontant, 75020 Paris. Nothing simpler!



## AFTER HERTFORD, AUSTRALIA, THE OPEN ROAD'S IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE

YOU'LL REMEMBER THAT last issue we told you Bill Ballard had met the Austin enthusiast in Wauchope who owns the Eighteen above and thinks the coachwork is the surviving example of only two such cars.

We thought that it looked very much like a standard 1934 Hertford. Barry Walker, he of the Austin Ex-Apprentices' Association and font of vast Austin knowledge, broadly agrees but queries the roof line and shape above the windscreen as not being mid-30s Hertford.

Has the 'bow and fore deck' of a cowled radiator car been grafted on to an earlier - chrome radiator - model.

The plot thickens. Do let us know what you think.

Meanwhile I've been doing my bit for distressed Austins in the south of France.

Mike Bevan, that stalwart of the Austin Ten Drivers' Club, was in touch with the editor to tell the sad tale of Norbert Martinot from Toulon who has a Ten tourer that put a connecting rod



Whoops a daisy! Is that what they call putting a leg out!?

'through the side' some time ago and for many years Norbert has been hunting for the parts to rebuild it.

Not easy in Toulon.

Could we help? Of course we could.

Those of you who read your *Austin Times* very closely will recall Martyn has two circa 1934 Austin Ten engines 'in stock'.

One has slight frost damage to the right side cylinder block wall and the other, although sound, had lain in the open for about 30 years with the head off so needs, to say the least, a 'lift to the face of the block'.

Albeit it 'Hobson's choice', Norbert has two options. To take the cracked block and have it repaired - pretty straightforward. A *produit*, as they say it that part of the world, might even suffice in this case.

Or to take the sound item and have someone undertake the quite extensive amount of machining required.

That said; we'll have him going in no time.

He also required connecting rods, pistons and a flywheel (missing teeth on the original) so much time the last month or so has been spent in the workshop and not at the computer!

**AÏDA MAURICE**

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# **Classic occasion**



THE CLASSIC MOTOR SHOW held at the NEC Birmingham from Friday 27th until Sunday 29th October spans five halls and half-a-million square feet (see advertizemzent elsewhere in this issue).

There will be lots of Austins to see plus around 1,000 other amazing classic and rare cars from all eras.

The theme for this year's show is 'Designs of the Decade' – a title that might have been tailor-made for our own Seven, only for *decade* read *century*!

The show celebrates automotive design by paying tribute to the cars that shaped trends. The best classic car clubs from all over the UK will pay tribute to all the elements which inspired the design of today's classic cars and in turn what the cars themselves inspired. They will display what they feel is the epitome of design in their favourite model.

Visitors get the chance to have their say by nominating their favourite automotive design in an online survey on the Classic Motor Show website ([www.necclassicmotorshow.com](http://www.necclassicmotorshow.com)).

For further information visit [www.necclassicmotorshow.co.uk](http://www.necclassicmotorshow.co.uk) or contact the booking line on 0870 060 3776.